

The Blue-footed Booby – an extremely rare sighting in New Mexico:

Submitted by Robert Mumford, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Park Ranger
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CONCHAS LAKE, NM - On the morning of Saturday, August 15, 2009, Park Rangers Bob Mumford and Steve Peterson were conducting a boat patrol of Conchas Lake, with the primary purpose of monitoring the Annual Boat Poker Run. At approximately 10:30 a.m., the rangers were passing by 'Cliff Divers Rock', a rock just south of the Dam that provides a jumping off place for young, adventurous visitors. Rangers frown on this activity and actively patrol the area to warn visitors of the physical dangers of jumping/diving from the rocks. Instead of seeing people visitors, Mumford noticed a unique looking bird sitting on the rock.

Mumford informed Peterson to slow down so he could get a better look. Mumford, a birding enthusiast, knew that this was a rare bird. He was 99.9% sure that this was a Blue-footed Booby, but he didn't have his bird guide with him. Ranger Mumford couldn't stop thinking about this bird during the following two hours of the boat patrol.

Mumford kept telling Peterson, his supervisor, "Steve, we have to go back and get another look at that bird."

At approximately 12:40 p.m., the rangers passed by the area again, and the booby was still there. The natural breeding habitat of the Blue-footed Booby is the tropical and subtropical islands off the Pacific Ocean, most famously the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador, which includes about half of all breeding pairs of blue-footed boobies.

Mumford kept looking at the bird in complete shock; he just couldn't believe the bird being so far from its habitat. Meanwhile, Peterson, an avid photographer, snapped off several digital photos of the bird.

Arriving back at the Conchas Project Office at 1:00 p.m. for lunch, Mumford immediately referred to the bird guides. He was elated as the photos confirmed he had just seen a sub-adult, Blue-footed Booby. He contacted Bill West of Wings West Birding Tours of Santa Fe, and Sandy Williams, who oversees all rare bird sightings in New Mexico. Mumford followed up by e-mailing photos to these experts for confirmation.

The news traveled fast as approximately forty bird watchers from all over New Mexico flocked to Conchas Lake Sunday, August 16th for a look at the New Mexico rarity. Many of these birders saw the bird, confirming that it was a Blue-footed Booby, the first-ever recorded sighting of this bird in New Mexico.

Words could not explain Mumford's excitement. He was so happy that he knew enough about birds to realize he had just seen something special. Avid birders are still calling Conchas Project and Mumford's home just to find out more about it.

According to Mumford, the Blue-footed Booby is a bird in the Sulidae family which comprises ten species of long-winged seabirds. The name "booby" comes from the Spanish term bobo, which means "Stupid" or "Fool/Clown", because of the bird's clumsiness on land. When it comes to feeding, their entire diet consists of fish such as sardines, anchovies, mackerel, or flying fish.

When in hunting mode, they fold their wings, point their bodies like a torpedo and dive into the water. Their plunges can be done from heights of 33-100 feet and even up to 330 feet. These birds hit the water at speeds of approximately 60 miles per hour and can reach depths of 82 feet below the water's surface.

Boobies can also dive from a seated position while floating on the water's surface. Also, their prey is usually eaten while the bird is still under water.

Folks at Conchas Lake hope the booby will hang around for a while and develop a taste for the bluegill and bass that live in the lake.

The blue feet of the booby is not just an attractive physical feature, but can be used to cover its chicks and keep them warm.

The birds also have an interesting mating ritual. The courtship consists of the male flaunting his blue feet and dancing to impress the female. During the dance, the male will spread his wings and stamp his feet on the ground, as well as lift his blue feet high off the ground and throw his head upward.

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